Leadership at the Top—Insights for Aspiring Leaders

Maj Gen Perry M. Smith

Maj Gen Richard C. Schulze Memorial Essay

It has been my great pleasure to have many opportunities to conduct leadership seminars for senior-level leaders from many walks of life. It is a great challenge to teach top leaders from such organizations as IBM, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the US Army Training and Doctrine Command, and, for the past three years, the newly selected brigadier generals of the United States Marine Corps during their week-long orientation program conducted at Marine Corps Headquarters. I would like to share with the reader some of the thoughts that I share with these groups as well as a number of the wonderful insights that I have gained from these general officers and business executives in my four-hour seminars on "leadership at the top."

This article is designed to help not only senior-level officials but also others who might aspire to top leadership positions. The very best leaders I have known are those who not only understood their jobs well but also worked hard to understand the jobs of their bosses and their bosses' bosses. Hence, I hope this article will be helpful to a wide audience of leaders and aspiring leaders.

The Mind-Set of Top Leadership

It is my strong belief, based on personal experience as a leader in many settings and many nations, that people in charge of very large or very complex organizations require a mind-set of "big leadership." Many of the basic principles of leadership continue to apply, but a top leader must be a visionary (in other words, must be a committed, long-range planner), must think like an investment banker (looking at all the options carefully), must be a risk taker (and be willing to make decisions with perhaps only 60 percent of the information he or she would like to have), must focus on much more than just the bottom line, and must be able to motivate people throughout many organizational layers. Top leaders must not only delegate quite aggressively but, even more important, must empower his or her subordinate leaders.

Conversely, the top leader must avoid being a micromanager, a perfectionist, or a workaholic. Many excellent people

Maj Gen Perry M. Smith, USAF, retired, is the president of Visionary Leadership of Augusta, Georgia. His books *Taking Charge* and *Assignment Pentagon* are used extensively in the war and staff colleges. He is also the author of *The Air Force Plans for Peace, 1943–45,* and *How CNN Fought the War: A View from the Inside.*

fail as top leaders because they are unable or unwilling to make this transition to this mind-set of top leadership.

The Ethical Issue

Top leaders find that maintaining and strengthening high ethical standards is tough since there is much that is not black and white in high level jobs. Let me illustrate my point with a couple of examples. As the Air Staff planner, I testified before committees and subcommittees of the US Congress on many occasions. I was encouraged, on occasion, by my subordinates to withhold some information in order to gain congressional support for Air Force positions. What I was asked to do was neither illegal nor, strictly speaking, dishonest but by withholding information, I would have been operating at a fairly low standard of ethics. In short, I would have been guilty of the "cowardice of silence." Once, I was criticized by a high official in the Air Staff for giving an answer to a congressman's question that was "too complete." I made the point to him that a complete answer was the "only way to go," and I continued to tell the full story on programs and issues. Happily, he never raised this point again. On one occasion, I was strongly encouraged by a member of Congress to say something in response to a question that would have been helpful to the Air Force but was not completely true. By refusing to lower my standard of ethics, I may have weakened congressional support for important programs. But, over time, members of Congress and key staffers learned that they would get straight and complete answers from me and from those that worked for me. The payoff for honesty was both respect and trust.

Top leaders must remind themselves often that when they speak they speak for themselves and for their institution. Fortunately, the US Marine Corps has an enviable reputation for high standards of institutional integrity. This reputation can be enhanced if every high official not only maintains high ethical standards in his or her personal and professional life but also keeps a close eye on subordinates to be sure that they do not, in the interest of expediency, bend the truth or sell their souls incrementally. Top leaders must have a strong sense of outrage when they observe sleazy behavior in their midst.

Perhaps the most difficult situation is when someone above you in the organization is unethical. The best example in recent times relates to unethical behavior by political appointees in two of our military departments (the ongoing Ill Wind cases). When this occurs, loyalty must be given first

to the institution and second to the official. Blowing the whistle on your boss can be very tough; but if the issue is ethics, it must be done.

It has been my experience that the best thing to do when something seems wrong is to move quickly. Procrastination on ethical issues is a terrible mistake. Standards can slide downhill fast if people think the big boss is looking the other way, giving tacit approval to unethical behavior. Happily, honesty pays off for top leaders. When they stand up and do the right thing, they gain great respect, not only up and down the chain of command but also with those in other services, with the Congress, and with the general public. The nobility of public service is enhanced by those at the top who place ethics as their number one priority.

The Value of Off-Site Seminars

One of the areas where leaders in the corporate sector do a better job of executive leadership than do many senior military leaders is in the productive use of "off-site" seminars. Top business leaders normally take their top management team (from 20 to 50 senior executives) to a location that is removed geographically from the corporate headquarters. The sessions usually are held once every six months and last for a day or two. The atmosphere is quite relaxed, with everyone in very informal attire. Here are my recommendations on how to make these off-site seminars productive:

• The top leader should attend every session and should chair most of the seminars.

• The leader should personally review the events since the last seminar, using a "fever chart" that shows the ups and downs of the recent past. He or she should accept much of the blame for the setbacks and give lots of credit for the successes.

• The boss should conduct a disciplined brainstorming session of perhaps two hours with the entire group. On a large board, which all can see easily, should be posted a list of "killer phrases." Such phrases as "We tried that before," "It's not in the budget," "It needs more study," "Let's form a committee," "That's not our problem," and "Be practical" must never be used in a brainstorming session since they kill creativity. The boss should announce at the start of the session that anyone who uses any of these phrases will be fined (one dollar for the first offense, five dollars for the second, etc.). This will quickly discourage the use of these killer phrases. A recorder (someone who can take dictation or can write very fast) should be appointed to jot down each idea. The leader should emphasize that quantity is more important than quality. Radical ideas often trigger the creative instincts of others and often lead to important new opportunities and directions.

• A futurist should be brought in to stretch the minds of each participant. Some of the better futurists are Marvin Cetron, Harland Moulton, and Joseph Coates.*

Important Skills for Top Leaders

Top leaders need to polish some skills that are not normally needed at lower levels of command. For instance, most top executives in the business world use dictation extensively. It is a marvelous way to get a lot of work done fast and, with the use of portable dictaphones, it can be done almost anywhere. I used dictation to write one of my books. Although I thought it would take me at least two months to complete a rough draft, it actually took me (with wonderful secretarial support) about three weeks to complete a 250-page book. (I dictated for about two hours each day—early each morning.) Most executive secretaries are skilled in taking dictation and giving it is very easy—all you have to do is talk. With a little practice, dictation skills improve rapidly.

Another skill that is very helpful for top leaders is speed-reading. There are excellent books on speed-reading for executives,** and there is a software program for personal computers called *Flash Read*. The top leaders who find they are captives of their overly full "in boxes" can get out of their offices and spend more time with their troops if they become speed readers. I stress with my audiences that it is never too late to learn the twin skills of dictation and speed-reading.

A third skill that is very helpful for top leaders is the use of creative questions. Leaders need lots of feedback, and one way to get it is through skillful questioning. "Is there anything in your personal or professional life that you would like to share with me since I am your commander, and perhaps there are areas where I can help?" In answer to that question, one of the colonels working for me replied, "Well, now that you asked, sir, I am dying of degenerative heart disease. I will be dead in five years." After further discussion I learned that the colonel's doctor felt that he could live a bit longer if he was not in such a high-pressure, 14-hour-a-day job. I moved him to another job and, at the eight-year mark, he is still alive and doing well. I am sure glad I asked the question and so are he and his family. I have learned three other creative questions from my participation as an advisor in perhaps the best leadership development program in the United States, the marvelous W. K. Kellogg Foundation's National Fellowship Program. (This is a three-year executive development program for people in their thirties who have already demonstrated high potential for top leadership. Up to now only one military member has been selected for this program.) Here are the questions: What two or three events in your life had the greatest impact on you and your leadership style? Who is your leadership role model, and why did you pick that person? What is the best book you have ever read on leadership, and why did you find it so helpful?

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*Harland Moulton recently retired from his position as professor at the National War College. He can be contacted at (703) 356-8773. Information on the other futurists, both of whom run their own forecasting companies, can be obtained by contacting the World Future Society, 4916 Saint Elmo Avenue, Bethesda, Md. 20814; telephone (301) 656-8274.
**One of my favorites is Diane D. Fink's *Speed Reading: The How To Book for Every Busy Manager—Executive and Professional* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982).

Long-Range Planning

The very best leaders of large organizations are those who know how to do strategic planning. The rules are fairly simple. The leader must give regular and direct access to the long-range planners. There must be a short long-range plan that reaches out into the future a minimum of 15 years. This plan must be endorsed and supported by the top leader. It should be updated every year. In addition, the leader should ask the "What are the long-range implications?" question whenever a decision is about to be made. The top leader must be an agent for change and not be a captive of the bureaucracy. Long-range planning must include divestiture planning to ensure that obsolete ideas, organizations, and systems are quickly and cleanly removed from the organization. The best current model of a long-range planning system in the federal government is in the US Coast Guard. Adm Paul Yost, who recently retired from his position of commandant, deserves great credit for setting up such an outstanding and workable strategic planning system.

Role Models for Top Leaders

Senior leaders and those who aspire to top positions should choose good role models to help them deal with the great planning and operational challenges that they face. My favorite is Gen George C. Marshall, USA, a man of great vision, compassion, and integrity. I also recommend to my various audiences a composite role model that combines the great qualities of Vice Adm Jim Stockdale, USN, for his heroism and wisdom; the late Maj Gen Don Morelli, USA, for his vision as an Army planner; Gen Al Gray for his charisma and for his commitment to self-development through reading; and Lt Gen Lee Butler, USAF, for his integrity and his intelligence.* Once a role model is picked, the leader or aspiring leader should spend some time studying this person's successes and failures with particular attention to how this leader handled operational, planning, support, and personnel issues. Much can be learned about dealing with adversity, personal hardship, and ethics by studying others who have walked the way of top leadership with towering ethical standards and enduring success. A good place to start this study is with Jim Stockdale's books—all well worth reading. The chapter on George Marshall in the book *Commander in Chief* by Eric Larabee (Harper and Row, 1987) should not be missed by an aspiring leader. The nobility of military service was enhanced immeasurably by the integrity of George Marshall and the personal courage of Jim Stockdale. Those leaders who serve in the military have a responsibility to enhance the dignity, integrity, and nobility of public service; role models can help leaders meet this responsibility.

Dealing with the Media and Congress

Top leaders must be skilled in dealing with the media and with the Congress. Many organizations have a media training program for senior officials. I strongly urge all senior leaders to participate in this program. It may be the most helpful few hours that any executive will spend. When the tough press interviews and press conferences take place, they will be prepared. As far as Congress is concerned, a day or two spent on Capitol Hill sitting in on hearings, visiting with congressmen and top staffers, and gaining insights from legislative liaison people from your service or agency is well worthwhile. As a general officer, I testified many times in both houses of the Congress. Each time I did, I was thankful for the two or three visits I made to Capitol Hill when I was a colonel working in the Pentagon. In my book on leadership of large and complex organizations, *Taking Charge*, I spent a lot of time and book space helping leaders walk with care through the minefields of the media and the Congress. It is also useful for top leaders in the military to remind themselves periodically of their constitutional responsibility to work cooperatively and ethically with the US Congress and to support vigorously freedom of the press.

Insights from the Business World

There are four areas where leaders in the business world are doing extremely well. In each area, the military generally lags behind and hence could learn some useful lessons.

First is the use of electronic brainstorming. If at all possible, top leaders should conduct electronic brainstorming along the lines of the marvelous new system designed by IBM. There are a number of advantages of electronic brainstorming using computer workstations. First, many ideas can be generated quickly since each participant can input ideas at his or her workstation by simply typing them in, using short phrases. Second, since there is no attribution, those in the group with the wildest ideas do not feel constrained from typing them into the workstation. Third, all the ideas are displayed automatically on a big screen in the brainstorming room so all can see them. One idea will often trigger another and another. By using an "expert system," the computer places each idea within specific categories. This helps provide organization and discipline to the process. Top military leaders who have never done either manual or electronic brainstorming with their people are missing a bet. They not only can gain some great ideas but they also can demonstrate their commitment to innovation by conducting these brainstorming sessions personally.

Second, many large corporations excel in the general area of divestiture. These corporations systematically attack obsolescence through disciplined divestiture planning. They close down factories, discontinue product lines, and disestablish

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*Maj Gen Don Morelli was a senior Army planner in the early 1980s. Despite the fact that he was dying of liver cancer and lived with a great deal of pain, he developed and implemented a new framework for Army doctrine, which had a profound impact on getting the US Army ready for the challenges of the 1990s and beyond. Lt Gen Lee Butler, USAF, formerly the director of strategic plans and policy (J-5) in the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has dealt with an unusual number of agonizing ethical issues in his career and has made the right choice in every case. In addition, his love of books and ideas makes him one of the most thoughtful and innovative officers in the military. General Butler assumed command of the Strategic Air Command in January 1991.

organizations in order to maintain efficiency and competitiveness. To give a dramatic example, a large pharmaceutical firm recently cut its headquarters staff from about 2,700 to less than 300—a reduction of nearly 90 percent. The military would have been better prepared for the tough cuts that will result from the dramatic events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union if divestiture had been an institutionalized process within the Department of Defense. One useful analytical technique for divestiture is "decision analysis." When I was the Air Staff planner in the early 1980s, I found decision analysis very helpful as we considered closing down the mid-Canada radar line that was no longer of any significant military value and decommissioning two obsolescent weapons systems, the 75 B-52Ds and the Titan intercontinental missiles.

A third area where top business leaders are making great strides is in the regular and disciplined use of electronic mail (E-mail). In general, top business leaders are considerably more proficient in the enlightened use of personal computers, software, modems, and E-mail than are the military contemporaries. E-mail is often a considerably better way to communicate with other high officials than "telephone tag" where busy officials spend much too much of their time, and the time of their outer office people, trying to make contact by phone. There are, of course, some dangers in relying too heavily on E-mail to communicate with subordinates, peers, and bosses. Face-to-face contact must always play a big role in leadership. However, by using E-mail regularly, the top boss can discipline the system, minimize the junk mail, and ensure a good balance between face-to-face communication and E-mail.

The fourth area of business leadership excellence is in the regular use of executive development seminars for top executives. Whereas the US military does a nice job in educating leaders up through the ranks of lieutenant colonel and junior colonel, it provides very little up-to-date and mind-stretching education for its senior colonels and for generals and admirals. With the exception of a handful of senior officers who get the opportunity to attend the fine summer program at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, most senior military leaders get little or no chance to do a one- or two-week mind-broadening experience. The generally excellent Capstone course for new flag officers, conducted by the National Defense University, unfortunately has very little on visionary leadership or on executive skills for top leaders. The week-long programs at the Center for Creative Leadership at Greensboro, North Carolina, would be a great place for our top leaders to recharge their batteries. Only the Army has used this program extensively in recent years. Attending a program like this about once every three to five years would be time well spent by top leaders.

A Reading List for Top Leaders

Gen Al Gray's emphasis on a systematic reading program for all Marines has not only inspired the Marine Corps, but it has encouraged many military professionals in other services. It is especially important for top leaders to have an active reading program; it is wrong to expect subordinates to read regularly if you are not willing to do it yourself. A good general guideline is one solid book per month, with at least three books per year on leadership. The books that top executives read should be somewhat different from those that are normally recommended for leaders at the lower level. The following books are the best that I have been able to find for top business, government, and military leaders: *Leadership Is an Art* (Doubleday, 1987) by Max Depree; *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (Free Press, 1986) by Richard Neustadt and Ernest May; *The Original Executive: New Ways To Manage Time, Paper and People* (Warner Books, 1983) by Stephanie Winston; *The New Realities* (Harper and Row, 1989) by Peter Drucker; and *When Giants Learn to Dance* (Simon and Schuster, 1989) by Rosabeth Moss Kanter. For those who don't have time to read all of these books, I stress the wisdom of former chief executive officer Max Depree and of those two great scholars, Neustadt and May.

The Leadership Challenges of the 1990s

Top leaders in the 1990s will have to deal with paradigm shifts (radical changes) of great consequence. These shifts are already taking place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and in many areas of technology. We can expect to be surprised in many other areas. If there is one certainty about the future, it is that it will not be "surprise free." Too many top leaders are caught up in the "activity trap" and are victims of the "tyranny of the present." Top leaders must constantly remind themselves and their subordinates that leadership is *not* keeping the boss happy, or getting to the bottom of the "in box," or staying out of trouble, or avoiding risks. Top leaders must work very hard at avoiding the Paul Principle. In brief, the Paul Principle describes a leader who is very effective when he or she takes over an organization but slowly loses competency over a period of time. Top leaders in the 1990s will find it necessary to decentralize and "demass" organizations in order to manage change, enhance creativity, and reduce excess layers and excess bureaucracy. Only the leaders who work hard at remaining vibrant and intellectually active will be able to provide the enlightened leadership that this nation needs and deserves in the 1990s and beyond.

I would like to close this article with a few of my favorite "one-liners" for senior leaders.

Proverbs: *"Where there is no vision, the people perish."*

Gen Matthew Ridgway: *"My greatest contribution as Chief of Staff was nourishing the mavericks."*

Max Depree: *"We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are."*

Jim Stockdale: *"Strange as it sounds, great leaders gain authority by giving it away."*

Benjamin Disraeli: *"The secret to success is the constancy of purpose."*

Anonymous: *"I am interested in the future because that is where I intend to spend the rest of my life."*